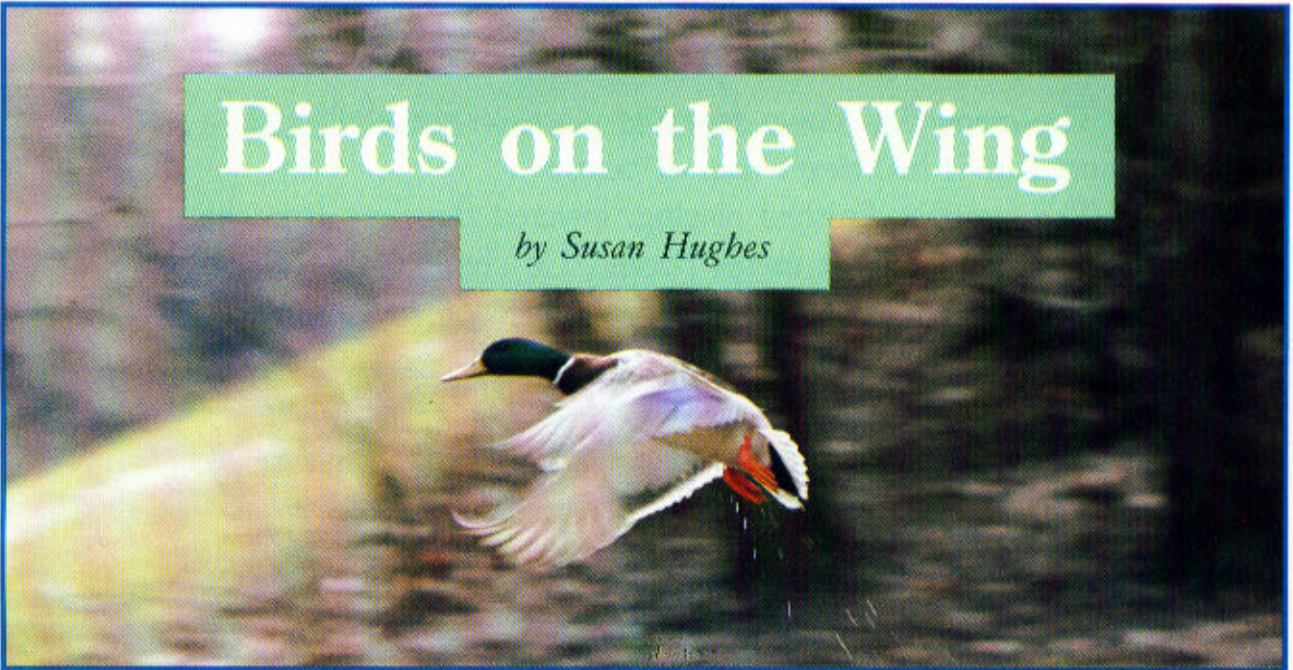


Birds on the Wing

by Susan Hughes



When you jump into the air, you can stay up for only a few seconds. Then gravity pulls you back to the earth. But birds can stay in the air for hours, or even days! What do they have that we don't have?

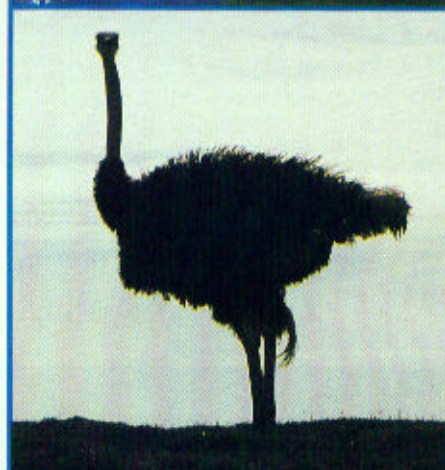


Birds are built for flying. They have bones and feathers that make them very lightweight. Most bones of birds are hollow with thin walls. They act like airpockets inside the bird. Also, birds are mostly feathers, and feathers weigh practically nothing!





Birds also have wings to help them fly. But not all wings are the same, and not all birds fly in the same way. Some birds soar, some birds flap their wings quickly. Some birds hover, some birds dive, and some birds cannot fly at all! Look at a bird's wings and you can tell a lot about how, or if, the bird will fly.



The long, pointed wings of a gull or the broad wings of an eagle are made for soaring. Wind and rising currents of air push up against the broad surface of the bird's wing. The bird can glide slowly downward through the rising air without moving its wings.



The wings of a pigeon or duck are general-purpose wings. They are made for flying from place to place, not for soaring.



Can you see the hummingbird's tiny wings? It beats them so quickly they look like a blur! The hummingbird can hover in one place while it sips nectar from a flower. It can even fly backwards!



The loon spends most of its time in the water, not in the air. The loon can fold its wings tightly against its body when it dives, smoothly and quickly, under the water. It doesn't have hollow bones, and this makes it a great diver, but not a very good flier. The loon must flap its narrow wings long and hard before it can lift its heavy body out of the water and into the air!

Some birds, such as penguins, have wings but do not fly. The penguin's narrow wings are like flippers. It uses them to move very quickly through the water. Penguins also use their wings for balance as they walk or hop from rock to rock.





Many birds are capable of long-distance flight. Look up to the sky in the spring or autumn, and you may see birds migrating. The greater snow goose flies from the Arctic to the southern United States or Mexico every autumn. Thousands of these geese stop for a rest in Cap Tourmente, Quebec, during their long journey.

Birds are soaring, diving, gliding. Birds are swooping, flapping, hovering. Birds are on the wing!

